



Western Feminist Perspectives on Gender Equality and Their Implications for Textbook Development in China

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Abstract. Gender equality is both a core value and a theoretical tenet of Western feminism. As feminist movements have evolved, the conceptualization of gender equality has undergone three significant shifts: from an initial sameness-based view of equality that ignored gender differences, to a difference-based view emphasizing gender distinctions, and further toward a perspective deconstructing the very significance of such differences. In the field of education, feminists have applied this unique gender-equality perspective to reveal gender inequalities embedded within school curricula, particularly in textbooks. They have critiqued the androcentric knowledge systems perpetuated by traditional educational materials and advocated for the development of a gender-equal curriculum. These efforts have not only profoundly influenced mainstream textbook culture in Western countries but also provide valuable experiences and insights for curriculum reform and textbook compilation in China.

Keywords: Feminism; Gender equality; Textbook development; Curriculum reform

1 Introduction

Feminism originated from the feminist movements in Western societies since the 18th century. Its initial aim was to secure political rights and development opportunities equal to those of men, thereby addressing the long-standing oppression women faced.^[1] Over more than a century, feminism has evolved through various waves—such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, and postmodern feminism—giving rise to numerous theoretical schools with diverse viewpoints. Despite their differences, these strands converge in a rational commitment to gender equality as their ultimate goal. The rise and development of feminist thought, particularly its persistent advocacy for gender equality, have profoundly influenced education, especially the curriculum domain. Based on a systematic review of feminist perspectives on gender equality, this paper further examines their permeation and impact on school curricula, particularly textbook culture, aiming to provide insights for textbook compilation in China.

2 The Conceptual Evolution of Feminist Perspectives on Gender Equality

The concept of gender equality emerged alongside the rise of feminist movements. As feminism evolved through different stages, feminists' perspectives on gender equality also varied. Overall, feminist views on gender equality have roughly undergone a three-stage evolution: from sameness-based equality that ignored gender differences, to difference-based equality emphasizing gender distinctions, and finally toward approaches seeking to deconstruct or transcend the significance of these differences.

2.1 Liberal Feminism and the Gender-Blind Conception of Equality

Feminism's first wave occurred between 1840 and 1925, with liberal feminism as its primary representative school of thought. Early liberal feminism was deeply influenced by classical liberalism and social contract theory. It posited that all individuals are born equal, endowed with the same potential for rationality, and therefore women should possess political rights and social status equal to men in the public domain. According to this view, any perceived shortfall in women's intellectual capabilities or social standing, compared to men, was attributed not to innate inferiority but to a lack of equal educational opportunities and conditions. As the British liberal feminist scholar Mary Wollstonecraft asserted, "a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore"[2]. Consequently, liberal feminism pursued an absolute, gender-blind conception of equality. While this difference-blind perspective on equality strongly emphasized women's social rights and made certain progress, its essence was a form of equality measured against a male standard. It failed to genuinely acknowledge the significant differences that exist between the sexes and the deeper social roots of these differences. Thus, in the continued quest for gender equality, feminism turned its attention to examining gender differences, simultaneously giving rise to the movement's second wave.

2.2 Radical Feminism and the Difference-Centric View of Equality

During the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, radical feminists turned their focus to the physiological and psychological differences between men and women. They argued that acknowledging these differences was a fundamental prerequisite for achieving genuine gender equality. In developing their theoretical framework, they introduced a crucial distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender. They posited that the disparities between the sexes stemmed not merely from biological distinctions but were primarily shaped by sociocultural norms and environments. From this perspective, radical feminism identified the root cause of women's oppression as the patriarchal system, which is deeply embedded within the broader social structure. This view is powerfully articulated by the radical feminist Kate Millet: "The domination of one sex by the other is so deeply rooted in our social structure that it is more firmly entrenched than any form of racial segregation, more

relentless than class formation, more consistent and more enduring than any other system of social hierarchy known to us. Patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, economic, and social forms"[3]. Therefore, they concluded that women's liberation and substantive equality between the sexes could only be realized by radically dismantling this entrenched system and implementing compensatory measures and institutional adjustments that favor women. However, by overemphasizing sexual difference and advocating for distinct treatment based on gender, radical feminism risked reinforcing a rigid, male-centered "binary opposition" mindset. This approach had the potential to produce the unintended consequence of perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes and prejudices against women, even as it sought to highlight female uniqueness.

2.3 Postmodern Feminism and the Deconstruction of Gender Differences

Since the 1980s, with the sudden rise of postmodernist thought, feminists began to incorporate postmodernism's emphasis on uncertainty, anti-authoritarianism, and decentralization into their theoretical frameworks. They argue that gender equality should be established on the basis of deconstructing sexual difference. In their view, the stereotypical positioning of male and female social roles is primarily shaped by the socio-cultural environment. The so-called standards of masculinity and femininity are not fixed but temporary, and the differences between men and women are not absolute but relative. As the contemporary American feminist Judith Butler argued, "Sexual difference is not a pre-given, natural fact that we encounter and then come to understand through analysis or experience. Rather, it is something that is produced through discursive practices and power relations, and it must remain an open question—one that cannot be fully resolved or definitively answered—if we are to avoid reducing the complexity of human experience to fixed binary categories."^[4] Postmodern feminism also contends that women's oppressed status is not caused by sexual difference itself but should be attributed to male patriarchal domination. For women to liberate themselves from this patriarchal rule, they must subvert and deconstruct men's discursive hegemony and establish their own voice.^[5] It is evident that this perspective on equality, which advocates for the dissolution of gender differences, aims to reconstruct equal and harmonious gender relations. This is achieved through the critique and deconstruction of the concepts of "woman," gender traits, and "sexual difference" themselves—concepts formed under the logic of patriarchal thinking—coupled with the empowering force of female discourse.

3 The Impact of Feminist Perspectives on Gender Equality on Western Textbook Culture

Feminism has consistently regarded education as a primary focus in the pursuit of gender equality. Through its unique critical lens, feminism has conducted a comprehensive critique and reflection on traditional education, gradually directing its atten-

tion toward the school curriculum. It has exposed gender inequalities embedded within the curriculum, particularly in textbooks, and criticized the androcentric nature of the knowledge systems they perpetuate. Advocating for the construction of a gender-equal curriculum that serves women's liberation, feminism has profoundly influenced mainstream textbook culture in Western societies.

3.1 Revealing Gender Inequality in Textbooks

Guided by the liberal feminist advocacy for a gender-blind conception of equality, some scholars have employed textual analysis to examine school textbooks from a gender perspective, revealing systemic gender inequalities within mainstream textbook culture. First, there is a significant quantitative disparity in the representation of male and female figures. Research by Kelly and Nihlen demonstrated that female characters were markedly underrepresented in most American textbooks, with their presence diminishing at higher educational levels—appearing more frequently in elementary school materials but becoming increasingly scarce in middle and high school curricula.[6] Similarly, an analysis of primary school textbooks by American scholars Child, Pottev, and Levine revealed a ratio of 73 male protagonists to 27 female protagonists.[7] Second, textbooks exhibit pronounced gender stereotypes, rigidly aligning characters with traditional gender roles by linking specific traits and social functions to biological sex. An analysis of British primary school textbooks by Coffey and Delamont showed that male characters were consistently associated with positive, active qualities such as initiative, bravery, decisiveness, independence, perseverance, and rationality. In contrast, female characters were often assigned negative or passive traits, including conservatism, timidity, dependence, passivity, pettiness, and indirectness.[8] Finally, textbooks perpetuate discrimination and bias against women through occupational depictions. Men are frequently portrayed in high-status, well-paying professions characterized as stimulating, creative, and open-ended, while women are largely confined to lower-status, lower-paying, and technically undemanding secondary jobs. Further validating these findings, Sofia Poulou's analysis of gendered discourse roles in textbooks confirmed the subordinate position of women relative to men in the majority of educational materials.[9]

3.2 Critiquing the "androcentrism" in the Knowledge System of Textbooks

Unlike liberal feminism's emphasis on a gender-blind conception of equality, radical feminism focuses on the actual differences between the sexes, pays particular attention to women's unique experiences, and demands fundamental changes to social structures. Consequently, in the field of education, its strategy for achieving gender equality is primarily dedicated to challenging and critiquing the unequal gendered power relations—specifically the transmission of "patriarchy"—within traditional education, especially in the curriculum. Feminist critiques of the curriculum emphasize that traditional educational content and teaching methods are not neutral. Instead, they reflect and reinforce the patriarchal values of society. This process not only re-

produces the dominant role of men in the field of knowledge but also perpetuates the inherent gender hierarchy in social culture, thereby becoming a crucial means of maintaining and replicating the patriarchal order.[10] This institutionalizes or legitimizes an androcentric curriculum knowledge system. For example, in history subjects, only events conforming to male standards are selected for textbooks.[11] Even in fields typically perceived as "value-neutral", such as the natural sciences, the underlying paradigms, methodologies, and value orientations are pervasively imbued with androcentric characteristics. It is precisely because this androcentric curriculum system marginalizes or neglects women's domains of inquiry that women's experiences, emotions, and values are inadequately represented. This systemic exclusion has contributed to the long-standing, socially constructed perception of women's intellectual inferiority.

3.3 Proposing Strategies for Constructing a Gender-Equal Curriculum

Gender-unequal textbooks artificially exaggerate differences between the sexes and implicitly convey a gender ideology of "distinct roles for men and women" and "male superiority." Furthermore, through their authority, these textbooks lead women to gradually identify with and internalize such unequal gender perceptions, thereby perpetuating and replicating unequal gender relations. Consequently, advocating for the construction of a gender-equal curriculum has become a significant goal for feminists across different periods. Liberal feminists argue that the core objective of reforming the existing curriculum is to eliminate gender bias and discrimination in textbooks. This can be achieved by adjusting the compilation methods to change the phenomenon of using male experience as the standard, and by ensuring balanced representation in the frequency of appearance, characteristics, capabilities, and achievements of both genders. For instance, this includes addressing the underrepresentation of female characters and challenging gender stereotypes in roles and occupations.^[12] Radical feminists contend that merely increasing the quantitative representation of women in textbooks is far from sufficient. It is essential to question the knowledge system presented by textbooks and develop a feminist curriculum centered on women's experiences, valuing both emotion and cognition, to challenge the traditional male-centered curriculum paradigm. This involves a fundamental critique of the androcentric nature of the knowledge systems themselves. Postmodern feminists aim to deconstruct the "binary opposition" thinking mode and strive to construct a gender-equal curriculum through the unique power of female discourse, allowing women's voices to be heard in the curriculum. They emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives and the social construction of knowledge. As the American feminist Nel Noddings stated, "To guide modern education out of its predicament, we must adopt a completely different way of thinking from men to organize education, and this way is feminine care"^[13].

4 The Implications of Feminist Perspectives on Gender Equality for the Textbooks Development in China

Western feminists, through their unique perspective on gender equality, pay attention to and reflect on gender inequalities within the curriculum, particularly in textbooks, and call for reforms in school curricula to achieve genuine gender equality in the educational process. This approach offers valuable experience and insights for textbook development in China.

4.1 Conducting a Comprehensive Review of Gender Inequality in Textbooks

Since the 1990s, influenced by Western feminist educational thought, Chinese academia has gradually begun to focus on gender issues in school curricula, particularly textbooks. Research has revealed a distinct tendency toward gender inequality in primary and secondary textbooks in China. However, these studies exhibit significant limitations: firstly, the perspective on gender equality often remains rooted in a gender-blind or absolute conception of equality, lacking sufficient consideration of gender differences; secondly, their conclusions are predominantly derived from textual analysis of social science textbooks, while analysis of natural science textbooks is neglected; thirdly, they offer a simplistic attribution of the reproduction and transmission of gender inequality in textbooks to cultural influences and social control, without in-depth and concrete analysis of the specific pathways involved. Western feminist insights—their understanding of gender equality, their attention to and critique of gender discrimination within natural science fields, and their critical analysis of the reproduction mechanisms of gender inequality under the "patriarchal" curriculum—provide a broader and more profound research perspective, which can help overcome these deficiencies. Only through a comprehensive examination of gender inequality in textbooks can the root causes be genuinely identified, thereby clarifying the direction for future reforms in textbook compilation.

4.2 Integrating Gender Equality into Curriculum Reform Policies

The development of textbooks must be guided by and based on relevant educational policies and curriculum standards. Since the 1970s, propelled by the efforts of feminists, the U.S. government has introduced a series of education acts. These acts stipulated that the federal government should not fund any curriculum programs containing gender discrimination and mandated strengthened gender equality reviews of textbooks, thereby providing a legal foundation for constructing gender-equal curricula.^[14] In China's Taiwan region, the curriculum guidelines have defined the objectives and learning themes for gender equality education, addressing its integration into various subjects across primary and secondary schools.^[15] In mainland China, although National Program of Action for Child Development in China (2001-2010) explicitly called to "integrate gender equality awareness into educational content,"

subsequent relevant educational policies and the curriculum standards for primary and secondary subjects have consistently lacked specific and clear stipulations in this regard. This indicates a significant disconnect between curriculum reform concepts on one hand, and government regulations and existing gender studies on the other. Such a disconnect readily leads to collective neglect by reformers regarding gender inequalities in the curriculum, especially textbooks, and potentially contradicts the aim of the curriculum reform. To change this situation, it is imperative to integrate the concept of gender equality into the policy-making process and further incorporate gender equality issues into school curriculum standards. Only by taking these steps can the compilation of gender-equal textbooks truly become a positive and effective practice of curriculum reform.

4.3 Enhancing Gender Equality Awareness Among Textbook Compilers

Consciousness guides action. The awareness people hold directly influences the choices they make in their conduct. In China, gender equality has become a mainstream social ideology. In principle, textbook developers and writers, when selecting and compiling textbook content, should strictly adhere to the standards of this prevailing social value. However, due to the influence of their deeply ingrained personal cultural biases, they may unconsciously select, compose, or organize texts that perpetuate values inconsistent with curriculum objectives and national mainstream ideology, including those related to gender.[16] To a certain extent, the pervasive gender inequalities observed in textbooks are manifestations—whether intentional or not—of the outdated gender perspectives held by these developers and writers. Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen gender equality training for textbook compilation teams.[17] This training should aim to continuously enhance their awareness of gender equality, fostering a conscious recognition of the importance of gender issues and empowering them to challenge their own inherent gender stereotypes and conventional views. Only when textbook developers and writers genuinely understand the profound significance of gender equality—for women's personal development and liberation, and for the transformation and progress of human society as a whole—can they translate this awareness into concrete actions within their practical work of developing and writing textbooks.

4.4 Establishing Gender Equality as the Primary Criterion for Content Selection

The selection of content represents a pivotal stage in the entire textbook compilation process. Feminist scholarship advises us to consciously avoid adopting the male perspective and needs as the default criterion for selecting texts and making unequal assumptions about learning outcomes for male and female students. Instead, gender equality should serve as the primary benchmark for content selection. On one hand, compilers should consider appropriately increasing the representation of female characters, particularly positive role models characterized by independent thinking and a

proactive spirit. This approach aims to highlight women's significant contributions throughout human societal and historical development, providing students with inspiring, educational, and exemplary female social roles. This, in turn, helps soften socially constructed gender differences and fosters a scientific understanding of gender among students.[18] On the other hand, compilers should challenge the "stereotypical" positioning of gender roles dictated by traditional notions, endowing both male and female characters, especially the latter, with more diverse personality traits. However, it is crucial that compilers guard against a superficial approach focused merely on adjusting quantitative gender ratios. Simultaneously, they must avoid substituting one extreme with another—simply replacing "androcentrism" with "gynocentrism". Maintaining a consistent and heightened sensitivity to genuine gender equality is essential throughout this process.

4.5 Respecting Cognitive Differences between Genders in Content Organization

With the deepening understanding of gender equality, issues of gender differences are gradually gaining recognition and respect. Current research on female cognitive styles indicates significant differences between men and women^[19]: during the cognitive process, women achieve better results when the object of cognition is related to their experiences, personal knowledge, and real-life contexts; whereas men are generally more adept at excluding the self and the context from the object of cognition, relying on logical thinking and abstract reasoning. Therefore, in the process of textbook compilation, these differences in cognitive styles between male and female students should be considered and respected as much as possible. It is unwise to simply and arbitrarily favor one style over the other. Instead, efforts should be made to achieve integration and mutual penetration of the two. This means that when organizing abstract learning content, it should be combined with concrete, real-life experiences and situations. Conversely, for knowledge derived from genuine life experiences and specific social contexts, relevant content that also encompasses abstract thinking and logical reasoning should be incorporated. This approach enhances the gender adaptability of the textbook's knowledge system, enabling both male and female students to achieve corresponding development.

5 Conclusion

Gender equality serves as a distinctive perspective and powerful tool for feminism to engage with reality and challenge traditions. The evolution of perspectives on gender equality—from a gender-blind conception, to one emphasizing differences, and further to approaches seeking to deconstruct these differences—demonstrates a maturing and deepening understanding of this principle. In their pursuit of gender equality, feminist scholars have critically re-examined and vigorously challenged the traditionally androcentric knowledge system embedded in textbook culture, proposing a reconstruction of the curricular knowledge framework to achieve gender equality in

education. This critique enlightens us to conduct a comprehensive review of gender inequalities in textbooks, integrate the concept of gender equality into curriculum reform policies, and conscientiously enhance textbook compilers' gender awareness. It is crucial to incorporate women's perspectives, standpoints, and experiences into the selection and organization of textbook content, while fully respecting the cognitive differences between genders. The ultimate goal is to eliminate long-standing gender biases in the curriculum, thereby promoting the holistic development of students.

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